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ABSTRACT

With the increasing cost of periodicals claiming an ever greater proportion of university library acquisitions budgets, a Wayne State University Education Library committee investigated the nature and value of newsletters. They considered two groups: commercial and noncommercial. The former are those which are published for profit and are intended to provide concise, specialized information to knowledgeable subscribers. They are meant to reach a decision-maker quickly and to be read quickly. The heterogeneous group of noncommercial newsletters is classified in tables according to readers and publishers, categories, and characteristics. Both are often of transitory interest, lack self-indexing, and are seldom cited in scholarly studies. When indexed, though, the research and subject-oriented newsletters, in particular, should be preserved. An acquisitions policy statement includes positive and negative criteria. It must be tested to determine its usefulness in evaluating the present collection and in aiding in future selections. (EMH)

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TECHNICAL PAPER NO. 6

Newsletters and the Library

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ABSTRACT

Newsletters divide into (1) commercial newsletters published for profit derived from the sale of subscriptions (not advertising), and (2) non-commercial newsletters issued by all kinds of organizations, for all kinds of reasons, in all kinds of formats, with all kinds of contents.

The commercial newsletters follow a standard pattern: current, significant information and news analyses presented in capsule form to a specialized clientele who pay, handsomely, for the restraint.

The non-commercial newsletters, by contrast, defy generalization. Though "non-commercial" the purposes may be mercenary or altruistic; intended for information dissemination, propaganda, or sales pitch; for internal readership (members, employees, dealers) or external (the public-at-large); the format may be telegraphic leaflet or very like an academic journal; contents range from organizational bonhomie to heavyweight research; prices, from free to middling.

Commercial newsletters (unlike the non-commercial) are largely absent from library shelves, perhaps because of cost; other reasons militating against subscription by libraries are that the "current awareness" factor requires quick consumption; the fragmentary contents are not drawn into the bibliographic citation network; the treatment is journalistic; and the material is often self-destructing.

On the other hand, we are overrun by non-commercial newsletters. In their favor, they give us a view of activities of important organizations, developments in subject fields, and substantive articles and research studies. Many are useful, even indispensable; but with many, even the low price (or free) should be no inducement for libraries. It is the sheer multitude of "inexpensive" newsletters that impels us to consider cancellation, streamlined processing, and other economies of the selective dissemination of information. Criteria for selection, rejection, and retention have been developed for application at the Education Library.

University libraries have been contending with soaring expenditures for periodicals. In a four-year period the serials allocation has risen from one-third of the print materials budget to almost two-thirds. In past years the inroads on the book allotment have been accommodated, to an extent, by an expanding budget. But now that budgets are no longer elastic, we may soon witness what amounts to a periodicals "takeover".

In casting about for ways to make decisions on serial collection building, a committee was appointed in October, 1973, to investigate the nature and value of the Education Library's current collection of newsletters. The subcommittee proceeded to:

a) identify and categorize newsletters
b) appraise their accessibility, use, and value
c) consider alternate means of processing and preserving
d) establish guidelines for selection and/or retention

The first discovery of the Committee was that "newsletters and the library" is a subject untouched by the professional literature. Not only is there no monographic literature, but even the handbooks on the care-and-feeding-of-serials take no notice of this class of material. Newsletters, as such, have had some attention from the fields of publishing and journalism; but even here "the sixth mass media" has suffered a neglect that is, in the opinion of one authority, "incredible." (1)

DEFINITIONS

At the very outset of our investigation we found that newsletters in Education come in abundant and confusing variety. Since librarianship has not dealt with the problem of identifying and categorizing them, the definitions from unabridged dictionaries provided a starting point:

> ...a printed sheet, pamphlet, or small newspaper containing news or information of current interest to or bearing upon the interest of a special group. (2)

This definition gets at such basic characteristics as:

- format (unpretentious)
- news / information (current, relevant)
- special group (as readership audience)

The Random House (unabridged) goes further with a two-part definition:

> 1. A written report sometimes illustrated and usually issued periodically, prepared by and for a group or institution as a business firm, charitable organization or government agency, to stockholders, and the like, and often to the press and public.
>
> 2. A written report and analysis of the news, often providing forecasts, typically directed at a special audience and mailed to subscribers. (3)

The two parts of the definition correspond roughly with a distinction that is fundamental to the newsletter publishing industry: "non-commercial" as against "commercial" newsletters.

The Non-Commercial Newsletter

The Random House definition stresses organization involvement in publishing and in readership audience. The examples given in the definition are merely illustrative and the list can be expanded:

Table I

Publishers and Readers of Non-Commercial Newsletters

	In Definition	Additional
Publishers:	Business firms	Non-profit institutions; Foundations, Trade associations
	Charitable Organizations	Non-profit associations; Labor unions; Political parties
	Government agencies	Education institutions
Readership Audience	Employees	Members of associations, societies, etc.
	Contributors	Dealers; Agencies

Table 1 (cont'd)

Readership Audience	In Definition	Additional
	Stockholders	Customers
	Press	
	Public	

The Commercial Newsletter

The Random House definition points toward the "commercial" newsletter; and, with the liberty of some additions (in brackets), we have effectively pinned down the species:

> A written report and analysis of the news [and related information], often providing forecasts, typically directed at a special audience and mailed to subscribers; [and published primarily for profit from the sale of subscriptions]

It is a "commercial newsletter" not because it deals with commerce, (it may or may not), but because it is published for profit. Non-commercial newsletters, by contrast, have other purposes: public relations, employee relations, promotion of sales, or the fostering of a wide variety of causes through the dissemination of information and propaganda to members and wider publics.

DESCRIPTIONS OF NEWSLETTERS

Commercial newsletters follow a standard pattern, one that derives from the basic purpose: sale of subscriptions. H. P. Hudson, editor of The newsletter on newsletters, the industry's trade publication, defines the commercial newsletter as an "...ordinarily... 8 1/2 x 11 four-page folder, a typewriter composition...supported by subscription revenue and not advertising."(4) It may be surprising that Hudson highlights such seemingly superficial details as number and size of pages and typescript. This is not occupational myopia;

it goes to the heart of the matter. The barebones format is of a piece with the abbreviated presentation. The subscribers are a specialized, knowledgeable clientele who want it told like it is -- and briefly. A fancy format is an irrelevance and a distraction; advertising, a mark of corruption; verbosity, a punishable offense.

By presuming knowledgeable subscribers the commercial newsletter can get down to essentials in a way that newspapers and general publications cannot. In four condensed pages (typically) it carries current, significant news and information, it spots trends, anticipates developments, and predicts the future. At its best it goes to key sources to uncover information whose true significance is often obfuscated by official handouts and other public pronouncements.

The range of subjects covered is limited only by what publishers find profitable. Sheehan (1971) finds commercial newsletters covering 22 major fields, which he further analyzes as follows:

> Of the 2,000 commercial letters published today, 40 percent report upon new developments within the economic framework of business and industry. About 25 percent pass along investment advice, while another 20 percent report...upon science and technology. Some 15 percent concern themselves chiefly with public affairs and social services.(5)

In the last-named category are included (to illustrate the diversity) education, training materials, hobbies, religions, and health. He mentions, also, a shift, in recent years, away from political analyses and toward boom areas of the on-going technological revolution such as "computers, electronics, energy sources, oceanography, air and water pollution control,...chemistry, and pharmaceuticals."

Since the commercial newsletter carries no advertising and depends solely on subscription revenue, the price comes high. And when a newsletter regularly carries information that (reputedly) can be converted into tangible benefits

(like net profit or more effective performance) the price can be stratospheric. Sheehan says:

> People unfamiliar with the subscription cost of commercial newsletters are normally shocked when they discover the exorbitant prices. Yet the special nature of the information provided by newsletters requires pricing in relationship to value. Obviously the president of an airline needs to know the latest work concerning all tariff action taken by the Civil Aeronautics Board. So it's almost mandatory that he subscribe to Air Traffic News at $225 a year... [However] most Washington newsletters range from $25 to $100 a year...[And] newsletters about business investments are almost always more expensive than those concerning education, the humanities, real estate, and social services. The least expensive...pertains to hobbies.(6)

The Education Library's eleven commercial newsletter subscriptions, for example, range from $10 to $195 with the median at $30.

The non-commercial newsletters, unlike their opposite number, do not follow a common pattern. The only elements common to the vast array of non-commercial newsletters (3,000 of recognizable status in the U.S. as of 1971) are too general to be enlightening. They are published for all kinds of reasons, in all kinds of styles, for all kinds of publics. They are published serially, but often irregularly; they usually disseminate information (or propaganda) but sometimes they are in the nature of reports, articles, or study materials. Some carry only abstracts and summaries; or publish research reports exclusively; or feature book reviews. The classes of information and "departments" (statistics, personnel data, necrology, committee reports, calendars of events, budgets, annual reports, promulgation of decrees and regulations) are almost endless. Given this diversity no general description is possible. Helpful, perhaps, would be a listing of categories developed from our Committee's direct examination of newsletters in the Education Library and elsewhere. These categories cut across the commercial/non-commercial division, and overlap in other ways; but as here listed, the categories are intended to emphasize the non-commercial newsletters that are most relevant to academic libraries.

Table 2

List of Categories of Non-Commercial Newsletters

1. Association newsletters (multitudinous; every association has its newsletter(s); the American Hospital Association is responsible for seven; ALA has spawned an even dozen).

2. Foundation and Institution newsletters (of prime importance to the academic library).

3. House organs, internal and external (more numerous, if possible, than association newsletters; issued not only by business firms but by associations and institutions; there is some overlap with the two preceding categories).

4. Government newsletters (highly important; Federal newsletters are listed annually in the February issue of Monthly Catalog; state and local newsletters are also valuable).

5. Washington newsletters (deal with legislative, regulatory and governmental and political matters as they affect a special interest group; e.g., ALA Washington newsletter).

6. Research newsletters (do more than report activities; may run original research of some length, e.g., Classroom interaction newsletter).

7. Abstracts or Summary newsletters (cull from other sources, e.g., Education recaps [for higher education]).

8. Local and Regional newsletters (often of prime subject value. Native-local has, in addition, archival and special reference value; outland-local is more expendable).

This heterogeneous list of categories (Table 2) has no logical principle or taxonomic elegance. It cuts across divisions, and overlapping abounds; but it is based on direct examination as well as perusal of the literature. It may convey some feeling for what non-commercial newsletters are like.

The characteristics of non-commercial newsletters, insofar as they can be summarized, are given in Table 3.

Table 3

Characteristics of Non-Commercial Newsletters

Format:
Extremely diverse. Any number of pages; paper can be slick or porous; mimeograph or offset or letterpress; may be illustrated; tabloid, leaflet, codex (no scrolls discovered). Some journals call themselves newsletters merely by reason of their mimeographed or otherwise shirtsleeves format.

Writing style:
Ranges from telegraphese (in imitation of its commercial prototype) to academese.

Price:
Varies from free, to nominal price, to nominal in name only! $10-15 not uncommc... Often packaged with membership fees.

Contents:
Activities of interest to members only (sometimes to member only); activities of interest beyond the membership rolls; developments in the field; research; editorial comment; articles, polemical or substantive; statistics (annual reports are a recurrent feature); book reviews, book notes; biographical and personnel information; convention materials; calendars of events; committee listings and reports; pronouncements, decrees, regulations, constitutions and bylaws, etc., etc. Advertising, classified or display, is frequently encountered.

ACCESS, USE, AND VALUE

In view of the prices of commercial newsletters, it is not surprising that libraries subscribe to very few. Of Education Library's 750 periodical subscriptions, 163 are newsletters of which only eleven are commercial. Of 125 well-established commercial newsletters mentioned in Sheehan (1971), WSU Libraries subscribe to only six. Price is certainly a major factor in the decision, but there are other factors. Given that the material is often carefully and laboriously researched, that it is frequently unique or exclusive, and that it is unbiased, one would expect, price aside, that commercial newsletters would score high with librarians. Not so; it is a current awareness

item. It is meant to hit the desk of a decision-maker responsible for large numbers of dollars, people, or other valuable resources. The information must reach the pivotal user quickly and it must be read quickly--hence the typical four pages. It is subscribed to by whoever can turn it to tangible advantage--hence the high price. Library processing and dissemination practices are not adapted to such an operation. In other respects, too, the commercial newsletter is ill-designed for the scholarly world. It is sketchy, has a rapid-fire style, is rarely indexed, and seldom gets cited in the scholarly literature. It deals with current activity in its practical aspect, not the eternal one; and each issue with its breathless analysis of the flow of events hastens the obsolescence of previous numbers. We should recognize, however, that an occasional title will merit consideration because of its general appeal, e.g., Kiplinger Washington letter; because of its celebrity status (Laneway report); or because the current, factual information is relevant to on-going programs and interests (Advanced technology/libraries). In passing, we note that only the last-named is received by WSU.

In our description of non-commercial newsletters we regarded them as intractably heterogeneous. Nonetheless, we now propose, as a first step toward appraisal, a scale for arranging the diverse and overlapping categories. It is a scale based on degree of interest, ranging from the less to the more relevant. (See Table 4)

Table 4

Scale of Interest for Rating Non-Commercial Newsletters

a) Limited interest; internal activities and information of interest to members only.
b) Local, Archival, and Special Reference interest.
c) Activities and developments; going beyond organizational interests.
d) Subject oriented material; polemical or substantive.
e) Research oriented material; summaries, reports, studies.

Sorting the categories of Table 2 into this interest scale, we get the following array from the perspective of the Education Library.

a) Limited interest:
   Association newsletters (internal; controlled circulation)
   Foundation and Institution newsletters
   House organs (internal and external)
   Local newsletters (especially of other regions)

b) Local, Archival and Special Reference interest:
   Local newsletters (of our own region)
   Association newsletters
   Foundation and Institution newsletters
   House organs

c) Activities and developments of broader interest:
   Association newsletters
   Foundation and Institution newsletters
   Government newsletters
   Washington newsletters
   Abstracts and Summary newsletters

d and e) Subject/Research interests:
   Association newsletters
   Foundations and Institution newsletters
   Government newsletters
   Research newsletters
   Abstracts newsletters

This scale and classification may suggest some ways of beginning to think about the use and value of non-commercial newsletters, crude and superficial though it be.

The access to non-commercial newsletters varies greatly. While it is safe to say that most are not indexed, or even self-indexed, a good many are indexed in varying degrees--particularly those newsletters which are journals in disguise. An examination of almost any of the scholarly indexes will turn up a clutch of newsletters. The question of access is, fortunately, amenable to exact statistical investigation, but unfortunately, an investigation not yet carried out. At this time we can supply statistics for Education Library only: Of the 163 identifiable newsletters, 26 (or 16%) are indexed in a standard source. (The 163 figure includes the eleven commercial newsletters, none of which are indexed.) As for indexing

services, Library Literature regularly indexes 12 newsletters; Education Index, none.

PROCESSING AND PRESERVATION

Because their usefulness is characteristically short-lived, there is less reason for binding and preserving newsletters than there is for subscribing to them. Commercial newsletters lay a strong (and specious) claim on preservation by virtue of their high price. This should be resisted. More than any other type of periodical, the commercial newsletter is a purveyor of ephemeral, abbreviated, and uncited material.

Non-commercial newsletters, likewise, are usually of transitory interest, usually lack self-indexing, and are seldom cited. Usually! But when indexed, the research and subject-oriented newsletters, in particular, make out an incontrovertible case for preservation. Fortunately, for economy's sake, the newsletter format lends itself to all kinds of inexpensive preservation tactics.

As for processing: After winnowing out those newsletters of enduring value which are entitled to the full treatment one would give to scholarly journals, we might well heed the advice of Osborn.(7) In referring to "marginal materials," he holds open the possibility of "stamp and shoot"--no checking in of issues, no following up for unreceived or missing issues, no binding. But, he continues, there should be an entry card for reference and administrative purposes, and listing in any printed list of serials as well.

SELECTION AND RETENTION

As we look back on the Committee's investigation, begun in October, 1973, we find it has grown to unexpected proportions. We had in mind a quick examination of Education newsletters and a brief report. We found that newsletters are

diverse and hard to define; we think we have come some way on this. We saw that it is hard to generalize about access to newsletters because newsletters are not generalizable creatures (commercial newsletters aside); or even to say whether they are much used and who use them. About processing and preservation, we thought that economies could definitely be achieved. Likewise, economies in our acquisitions policy, the main target of our investigation, could be accomplished on a broad scale. A draft acquisitions policy statement has evolved from our efforts. (See Appendix). This has to be tested fully whether it can serve as guidelines to evaluate our present collection and to aid in future selection.

The Newsletter Committee

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APPENDIX

Acquisition of Newsletters - A Policy Statement

The newsletter does have a place in the college and university library. It may be easier to develop a policy for titles not to include in the collection as opposed to developing a policy for categories to include. However, the following criteria are offered as a beginning in developing such a policy.

The following questions should be asked of each title, with a sufficient degree of affirmative response warranting investment:

1. Deals with specific local information (dealing with Detroit or Michigan)?
2. Deals with more than organizational information? It must include subject information of national interest.
3. Deals with a strong subject area that is held in the Library? In the Education Library those fields would be (a) Higher Education, (b) Library Science, (c) Reading, (d) Current controversial subjects, e.g., Career Education, Alternative Education. Newsletters in those subject areas should be given special consideration.

The following negative criteria should be considered before a subscription to a "newsletter" type periodical is decided upon:

1. Local interest (other than our own region)
2. House organs
3. Organization publications of interest only to members
4. Highly specialized with limited audience
5. Abstracts or summaries of readily available material
6. "Washington newsletters." Frequently duplicate each other. (Obviated by Education Daily)
7. Inept or trivial
8. High-priced. Not a pejorative designation; merely a signal for careful screening
9. Out-of-scope

Newsletter Committee

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FOOTNOTES

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